

MHR *Connections*

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Students deliver anti-racism message

The Burton Cummings Theatre came alive with music and messages at the second annual Rock Against Racism Concert on February 15. The audience of almost 1000 clapped,



Outreach Officer Beatrice Watson thanks the Maples Unity Group for supporting the Commission's youth conferences.

cheered, and whistled not only for the many local musicians that took the stage, but also for the speakers who delivered human rights messages.

Outreach Officer Beatrice Watson was asked to talk about the Manitoba Human Rights Commission. She said that in 2006 almost 24 % of human rights complaints were

based on ancestry, nationality, ethnic origin and religion.

"Racism can enter all aspects of our lives," she said, adding that "it can be subtle or blatant but never acceptable."

Ms Watson congratulated the Maples Collegiate Unity Group, which organized the concert, for going from standing by, to standing up. "You have resisted silence and are making a difference," she said above the applause of the audience.

Also speaking at the Rock Against Racism Concert was Kevin Chief, who is coordinating the new "Innovative Learning Centre" program at the University of Manitoba, Kim Jasper, the Director of Communications for



Between songs, "Stichez" (right) of the Brat Attack spoke out against racism.

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The Rights Connection by Janet Baldwin - Chairperson Prayer in Public Schools

The issue of prayer in public schools has been attracting a lot of media attention of late. Some public schools in Manitoba begin the day with the recital of a Christian prayer or scripture reading. The Public Schools Act of Manitoba provides some legal basis for this and the Department of Education has guidelines for the implementation of religious exercises in public schools. Essentially, prayer or instruction must be requested by parents of specified threshold numbers or percentages of children. Religious exercises must be held outside regular instruction time and participating students must voluntarily attend a non-classroom school location where the exercises are held. They must be no more than ten minutes in length.

School trustees are struggling to implement this legislation. In some Franco-Manitoban divisions, most parents have opted to have their children participate in religious exercises. The large number of participants and logistics such as school bus arrival times make holding the exercises in the hallway or gymnasium before class difficult. Requiring non-participating children to leave the classroom, however, would be forcing them to opt out, something neither permissible under The Public Schools Act guidelines nor possibly The Human Rights Code.

The Human Rights Code and the Charter prohibit unreasonable discrimination on the basis of religion in the provision of education. Religion includes the absence of religion. As noted by the Ontario Court of Appeal in the Zylberberg case: "The peer pressure and the class-room norms to which children are acutely sensitive, in our opinion, are real and pervasive and operate to compel members of religious minorities to conform with majority religious practices."

School trustees in one division have sought to reconcile their legal obligations by instituting a minute of silent contemplation at the start of the school day when students may pray or reflect silently, as they choose. A group of parents has objected that this is too little to satisfy the school's obligation under The Public Schools Act and has organized a court challenge. All of this surely invites the question of whether religious exercises and instruction have any place in non-sectarian public schools.

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the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and members of the Maples Unity Group. Ace Burpee of Hot 103 also donated his time to host the evening.

The entertainment included twice Grammy nominated Fresh IE, the reggae music of the Glen Williams band, which inspired the students to form a Congo line through the aisles of the theatre. Punk rock was provided by The Brat Attack. The concert ended with the St. Laurent Fiddlers and the Half Pints dancers.

Musician and actor Tom Jackson, who has dedicated much of his time and efforts to helping the disadvantaged, made a special appearance singing three songs. Mr. Jackson is also known for his Huron Carol Benefits Concert series that raises money for food banks.



Singer and songwriter Tom Jackson performs "Desperado".

The Rock Against Racism Concert was organized by the Maples Collegiate Unity Group. The group's latest project is to raise \$7,500 by next year to help fund the building of a school in Sierra Leone.

Humour can be in the eye of the beholder

by Elliot Leven- Manitoba Human Rights Commissioner

Jokes about ethnic and other minority groups raise a tricky question for people who care about human rights. On one hand, insensitive jokes which promote negative stereotypes should be strongly discouraged by all those who care about human rights. On the other hand, not every joke about a minority group is offensive or insulting. Sometimes humour is in the eye of the beholder.

As a Jewish Canadian, I am sensitive to negative stereotypes about Jewish people. However, I am also a great fan of Jewish comedians such as Jackie Mason, who have made their careers poking gentle fun at Jewish foibles. It is impossible to generalize; every joke is unique. For example, like many ethnic groups, Jews pride themselves on their love of good food. We love to joke how Jewish social events revolve around food. Jackie Mason does a whole comic routine about how, when Jews go out for coffee, the coffee must be accompanied by cake.

I guess the key is that this comic routine is based on a neutral, rather than a negative stereotype. A love of cake is neither a positive nor a negative quality. Therefore, joking that an ethnic group likes food is not the sort of joke that does any harm. Some people may not find it funny, but a culture that includes Jackie Mason is richer than a culture that would shun or censor him.

It is also true that, as minority groups become more established in Canada, they probably develop thicker skins. When award-winning novelist Mordecai Richler published his comic masterpiece *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* in 1959, quite a few Jewish readers were critical of Richler, because the title character is a mixture of good and bad qualities, and some Jewish readers would have preferred every Jewish literary character to be pure and saintly. However, if Duddy Kravitz were published today, few Jewish readers would express any concerns. Times have changed since 1959.

Whereas Duddy Kravitz is a genuine literary work, other examples of comedy are more problematic. The recent *Borat* movie is a good example. Some viewers found the movie delightfully irreverent. Others found it tasteless and offensive, at least in part. Perhaps it walked a fine line between good and bad taste. We may have to wait many years before we know which side of the public opinion line it will rest.

There is no definitive rule when it comes to humour. As Canadians living in the year 2007, we will just have to balance sensitivity to minority feelings, with the fact that even high-quality humour sometimes offends a few people.

International Women's Day

Theme - Achievement of Women at Work

March 8, 2007

Legislative Building

Honourable Nancy Allan - Host

11:30 am - 1:00 pm

Guest Speaker:

Ms Kerri Armstrong - single parent/ teacher/university student/volunteer

Entertainment : Malko Watson singer-songwriter

Official Proceedings 12:15 pm

Reception: Room 254

There is one day a year when women on all continents, often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences, come together to celebrate. International Women's Day is marked around the world and is commemorated at the United Nations. The day celebrates the story of ordinary women as makers of history.

March 8 is a day to celebrate women's achievements and their continual commitment to the struggles that remain to achieve full equality.

The idea of an International Women's Day began at the turn of the last century.

The industrialized world was experiencing a booming population and radical ideologies. Few causes have generated more intense and widespread support than the campaign to promote and protect the equal rights of women. The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco in 1945, was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right.